PROCEDURES AND PEOPLE

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Some thoughts for churches and mission agencies from a government scandal.
Category: Observations

If you are in the UK, you can't have failed to notice that the government has got itself into a bit of a mess over the last few days. For those who are not aware of the case, the House of Commons Standards Committee found that Owen Patterson a Conservative MP had broken House rules and suspended him for a short period. However, the government decided that the existing process was not fair and moved a vote in the House to change the rules and at the same time, suspend Mr Patterson's penalty. The vote was passed, but it caused such a furore that the government have been forced to review their decision.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case (and I don't want to comment on that here - that's what Twitter is for), we are left with two overriding impressions:

- The government looks sleazy. To all appearances it seems as though they used House of Commons procedure to protect one of their own people when he had been found guilty of wrong-doing. In terms of image management, this is a disaster.
- The government looks incompetent. Perhaps the way the standards committee works does need to be overhauled, I don't know. However, by tying a generic change to the case of a specific individual, the government have fatally weakened their own case. This could and should have been avoided.

If you want to know more, the British media are full of the story at the moment, but this is a good place to start.

So, why am I writing about this?

If the government intention was to change the standards rules, they made a complete mess of the process by tying that change to a specific case. As a general principle, you cannot change personnel policies when you are in the middle of a crisis. You have to have robust policies and procedures in place before things go pear shaped. This is as true for mission agencies and churches as it is for governments.

Let's assume that a church is supporting a mission partner in some far flung land. What happens if that partner is found to have been sleeping with someone who is not their spouse? What is the church's role in this? Do they just delegate everything to the particular agency, or do they have an obligation to discipline and disciple their missionary? What they can't do is make up a policy on the fly. In all likelihood, their mission partner will arrive home in a day or two and the church will need to

have a thought through position on what to do.

Or, what happens when a mission partner feels that they cannot carry on in their work and they need to go home and get a job? Or perhaps when partners have to be evacuated home in an emergency because of security concerns? What is the church's role in these situations? How do churches and agencies work together?

Obviously, you cannot have a specific policy for every eventuality, but there do need to be general principles in place that all parties are aware of.

Whenever I'm asked to look at a church's mission policy, the first thing I look for is the process for managing crises. Hopefully, it will never be used, but if it is needed, it is absolutely essential that it is robust.

It's not really my field, but churches need to think through similar things; especially small to mid-sized ones that only have one pastor and a small eldership. What happens if your pastor goes off the rails in one way or another? Who is responsible for overseeing things and ensuring that the pastor takes the correct steps and gets the support that they need?

Now, you may say that I am being unnecessarily negative in suggesting that these things might happen. The problem is that I've seen all of these cases and more in my career and some painful situations have been made even more so by people having to make up policies and approaches on the hoof in the middle of a crisis.

Pray for the best, but prepare for the worst (and hope that you never need it).